Nicolas Standaert

The Intercultural Weaving of Historical Texts: Chinese and European Stories about Emperor Ku and His Concubines. Leiden: Brill, 2016. Pp. 368. Hb, \$150.

A proliferation of books on the long history of Christianity in China has grown increasingly robust in recent years, and Nicolas Standaert has been a prodigious influence on this trend. This book, which confronts the question of how Jesuit missionaries influenced the reading and production of history during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, follows in the footsteps of other important monographs he has authored in the past decade. This new work is a sinological *tour de force* that underscores the significant position that Jesuit missionary historians in China held, perhaps unwittingly, in the inauguration of the European Enlightenment, and also in the sweeping transition that transformed global historiography from a largely biblically-reliant narrative in the West to one that was generated through the “interweaving” of historical texts that were as cross-cultural as extra-canonical.

Standaert divides his book into two parts. The first centers on the evolution of Chinese historiography from its earliest manifestations, represented by such works as the annalistic *Chunqiu* 春秋 (Spring and autumn annals) and *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (Commentary of Mr. Zuo), and the more narratologically composite works such as the *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the grand historian), into what later became the popular *gangjian* 綱鑑 (Comprehensive mirrors) genre of Chinese historiography. These *gangjian* histories, which consisted largely of abridged histories of China's past, often with accompanying commentaries (*zhujie* 註解), became the principal resources used by Jesuit missionaries to compile the historical chronologies and narratives that they produced and sent back to their native Europe for publication. The second part, which is the most intriguing section of his book, considers the respective historical writings on early China by two contending groups of Jesuit missionary scholars: the interpretations engendered by the so-called “Canton Group,” who espoused the Figurist method of viewing China's pre-Qin 秦 history as mythological, and viewed ancient Chinese texts as “revealed” Judeo-Christian works that had become misunderstood by later Chinese readers, and the “Beijing Group,” who adopted a more historically scientific approach to interpreting China's past and its early historical records. Throughout his study on the “intercultural weaving” of historical writing, Standaert interweaves ancient Chinese accounts of the “miraculous” births of the sons of Emperor Ku 帝嚳 by his concubines in order to demonstrate through one example how disparate interpretations of a single event can be between Chinese themselves, between European missionaries, and between Chinese and European missionaries. The end result of this

“intercultural weaving” was rather dramatic; as he notes in his introduction, “China seriously modified the European worldview” (3).

Chapter One introduces the formation of the *gangjian* genre, while also discussing China’s early accounts of how Emperor Ku’s two consorts, Ji-andi 簡狄 and Jiang Yuan 姜嫄 gave birth to the progenitors of the Zhou 周 and Shang 商 dynasties, Houji 后稷 and Xie 契. Standaert traces textual appearances of these births in Chinese historical works, and distinguishes between Chinese sources that recount the conceptions of Houji and Xie as having been miraculous (without fatherly involvement) and non-miraculous (with fatherly involvement). Chapter Two investigates the sources employed by missionary writers on the topic of Chinese history focusing on two centuries of Jesuit polymaths, the late seventeenth century and the eighteenth century. This earlier era included Jesuits Martino Martini and Philippe Couplet, and the second era was comprised of French Jesuits whose works were sent back to France where most of their manuscripts unfortunately languished on the desks of their confrères who prevaricated over how to interpret and revise their texts vis-à-vis historical chronologies based upon readings of the Septuagint and Vulgate bibles. Here, Standaert first explores how the Historian Jesuits, such as Vincent de Tarte and Joseph de Mailla, largely accepted the veracity China’s “three dynasties” era, or the Xia, 夏 Shang, and Zhou, which he juxtaposes against the Figurist Jesuits, such as Joseph de Prémare and Jean-François Fouquet, who denied the historicity of this era and described the early Chinese records of these dynasties as figurative texts embedded with symbolic allusions to what appears in Judeo-Christian scripture. Intellectual disputes between the Historians and Figurists resulted in sustained tensions within the Society of Jesus, though it was the Historians that most influenced such thinkers as Voltaire, who took the Jesuit-created Chinese historical chronologies as evidence of the bible’s inaccuracy. This Jesuit influence on the Enlightenment was due to missionaries like Joseph-Marie Amiot, who inaugurated “epistolary communication with members of the scientific academies in” Europe (145), and introduced non-biblically-based historical records to the Western cognoscenti.

The second half of Standaert’s book, beginning with Chapter Three, confronts how European missionaries interpreted Chinese history “through the lens of intercultural hermeneutics” (166). After devoting, in my view, too much attention to the Chinese “Old Text/New Text” 古文今文 debates of the Han, 漢 Standaert turns in Chapter Three to examples of how the births of Houji and Xie appear in the *Shijing* 詩經 (Classic of Odes), and were interpreted in subsequent histories and commentaries. Chapter Four is perhaps the most interesting section of this book, and it is here that Standaert provides an

insightful analysis of how Jesuit historians navigated the miraculous birth accounts of Emperor Ku's sons. Here is discussed how the famous Canton Figurist, Joachim Bouvet, interpreted the birth of Houji as a figure of Jesus Christ, as he was miraculously conceived after stepping into the footprint of Shandi, 上帝 or, as he interpreted this being, "God." Houji's mother, Jiang Yuan, is thus figuratively compared to the Virgin Mary. By and large, these Jesuit Figurist manuscripts were not allowed to be published once they reached the desks of their confreres in Paris due to the eccentricity of their assertions.

Chapter Four concludes with an account of strategies employed by the Historian Jesuits to more effectively anchor the interpretations of the Figurists into the more solid ground of textual and astronomical evidence. Marshalling evidence from textual examination, the testimonies of expert Chinese literati, and collaborating eclipse dates during the Three Dynasties located in ancient Chinese records and Jesuit calculations, Historian Jesuits such as Vincent de Tartre asserted that Figurists "torture the Chinese texts" to prove their points, which "make people laugh in China" (268). Standaert's explanation of the vicissitudes of the intellectual courtship between the Jesuits and China's past in this chapter is deftly furnished.

I have very few critiques of Standaert's important work, but I do think that more could have been said about the intertextuality that was already extant in ancient China, such as the cut-and-paste histories that were produced by Sima Qian 司馬遷 and Ban Gu 班固. More could have been said about how the "interweaving" of sources was a codified method of historical writing far before Jesuits first encountered China. Sima Qian's famous declaration about writing history, "I transmit and do not create," 述而不作, functioned as an adage for how later histories were compiled. In addition, too little credit is afforded the point that "miracles" in ancient China were intended to function as evidence of "Heaven's Mandate" in the political landscape of dynastic legitimization. For example, Ban Gu recorded that Han Gaozu, 漢高祖, the founder of the Han, was conceived when a scaly dragon descended to his mother and miraculously impregnated her (*Hanshu* 1A.1). Incidents such as this served to underscore the reception of Heaven's Mandate, 天命 which is another area that Standaert's narrative could have better elaborated on. Birth accounts appear quite commonly in early Chinese texts when historians attempt to legitimize dynastic founders. Now and again the English translations from the Chinese could have been more carefully executed. When translating a line from the *Shijing zhengjie* 詩經正解 (Accurate explication of the classic of odes), Standaert renders "以見其受命於天" as "all this took place to make manifest that he was sent by heaven," which might better have been translated as "in order to show that he received the Mandate from Heaven" (261).

These slight quibbles aside, Standaert's book on the intercultural "weaving of historical texts," *East–West*, is an example of scholarship at its best. He has again offered a contribution to the fields of classical sinology and sino-missionary studies that shall remain a necessary voice in the scholarly discourse on how China and the West have encountered and changed one-another in ways that have transformed the fabric of history.

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